Community-Driven Redevelopment

The Foundation for a Whole Blocks Revitilization Strategy



ReBUILD METRO

RE-BUILD JOHNSTON SQUARE NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATION

BUILD
ROOTED IN COMMUNITY.
COMMITTED TO CHANGE.

INTRODUCTION

Over a 20-year history of redeveloping East Baltimore neighborhoods, ReBUILD Metro has upheld "community-driven redevelopment" as one of our core principles. This term—*community-driven*—could easily be read as a vague aspiration, but when we use it, we are defining a series of specific and evolving actions that have made our "whole blocks" revitalization process successful. For starters:

- We launch redevelopment programs in neighborhoods after local leaders and organized community groups have formally asked us to partner with them.
- We partner with community members and organizations in selecting, planning, and implementing a holistic set of community development strategies, from gaining site control to raising funds to completing construction.
- We ensure that all our development projects align with local community plans, that we have community approval before launching a project, and that we offer regular opportunities for community participation and influence as these projects move forward.

Community-driven redevelopment is an interactive process that empowers community members to pursue and realize their aspirations within the context of financial and market constraints. This approach prepares communities to develop practical grassroots strategies to rebuild homes, revive failing markets, and foster inclusive and resilient communities without displacing anyone. After decades of practice, we have come to believe that any neighborhood redevelopment strategy not grounded in community-driven principles will fail to meet the needs of the community.

Community members know what their neighborhoods need. When organized groups of residents become trained and skilled drivers of a local redevelopment strategy, they can use this strength to gain buy-in from partners and decision-makers and to hold them accountable to helping to meet these needs, both during the reinvestment process and long into the future. We believe this approach is good for neighborhoods, and for entire cities.

This model for community-driven redevelopment begins with several concrete steps—simultaneously implemented over a multi-year period—that provide a foundation for any physical redevelopment project or market intervention. These practices range in (1) the level of expertise they require and (2) the extent of involvement from a development partner like ReBUILD, but every one of them requires leadership, collaboration, or participation from those who live, learn, or lead in the community. Each practice is also its own trust-building exercise between a developer and the community, and if applied with a true spirit of collaboration and mutual respect, each plays a part in forging a strong relationship between the two partners that makes all the difference once the physical redevelopment process begins.

Community-driven redevelopment does not need to follow this specific template; every community should develop its own methods to meet its specific needs and circumstances. However, if we as a city are going to successfully rebuild the dozens of neighborhoods that are plagued by abandoned properties, we do need to ensure that—in some way—every community has a leading role in the process, from start to finish.

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Community-Driven Redevelopment

We engage residents in holistic long-term planning to develop a shared vision for revitalization, then engage them throughout the reinvestment process.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Community organizing is the engine that empowers communities to lead redevelopment in their neighborhoods. Community organizing begins with neighbors building strong relationships and trust with one another around common needs and causes. By building a network of relationships that are *honest, evolving,* and *goal-driven*, communities can begin to identify common issues, craft responses, and take collective action to drive community change.

One-on-Ones

Relationships begin with one-on-one conversations to understand what motivates or isolates a community member. What gives them hope? What makes them angry? What makes them feel like they can make a difference? What inspires them to take action? By identifying shared interests, needs, desires, and pain points, residents can build trust and begin to come together to find solutions for the challenges facing their communities.

Community Gatherings

As a community builds a foundation of interconnected relationships, they can begin to organize regular community meetings and gatherings planned around the common needs and goals that have been identified in one-on-one conversations. These gatherings are not only spaces for neighbors to plan activities; they are opportunities for communities to articulate a shared story of who they are based on their shared histories, experiences, and values. The story of *"who we are"* fosters a story of *"what we do"*—collective actions that will strengthen this shared identity over time.

Achieving Interim Victories

When a community gathers regularly around a common story and purpose, community leaders can begin to organize and empower their neighbors to take actions to improve their neighborhoods. Achievable early-stage actions may include organizing a successful community cleanup, turning a vacant lot into a community garden, or completing a traffic calming project on a busy road.

While thoughtful early successes may not address the underlying issues or injustices a community faces, they set the stage for a long-term community redevelopment strategy in several ways:

- They bring immediate quality-of-life improvements.
- They demonstrate to neighbors that they can create change by working together.
- They further strengthen local relationships and trust.
- They increase morale and cultivate a sense of power.
- They foster a sense of shared ownership of the outcomes in the community.
- They create opportunities to build trusting partnerships with individual, group, and organizational partners and allies that can bring in resources from outside of the neighborhood.

WHAT MAKES A STRONG COMMUNITY LEADER

Community leaders are residents who care deeply about their neighborhood and who can effectively bring neighbors together to catalyze change. The strengths of community leaders typically include:

- Commitment to serving their community
- Long-term vision
- Patience and persistence
- Competency and enthusiasm for collaboration

Community members often become leaders through formal in-depth training and long-term guidance from an institution that specializes in community organizing and developing leaders. Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD) has played this role for many community leaders across Baltimore.

Through ongoing actions to improve their neighborhoods, organized community leaders offer new residents and allies routine opportunities to join their cause, further fueling the power of the entire community to drive change.

Why Interim Victories Come First

A community redevelopment process tackles some of the most entrenched challenges facing disadvantaged neighborhoods: pervasive blight and abandoned houses; cyclical disinvestment and market failure; lack of economic opportunity. While there is urgency in addressing these issues, *the community that learns how to win small battles will have the experience, confidence, mutual trust, and political power to win the bigger ones to come*. By starting with more manageable problems, communities—and their partnerships—build the strength, expertise, and institutional memory to address more complex challenges that had previously been elusive. This process of "building from strength" is vital to community-driven redevelopment.

CASE STUDY: AMBROSE KENNEDY PARK

When Rebuild Johnston Square Neighborhood Organization (RJSNO) first began organizing neighbors and identifying their pain points, a thread emerged: the dilapidated Ambrose Kennedy Park on Johnston Square's southern edge. Although it was a city park, Ambrose Kennedy Park had become an eyesore and a nuisance due to its extreme blight, including a deteriorating pool and basketball court, overgrown fields, and widespread litter and waste. These problems were harmful to nearby residents; they also made the park a perfect target for community action.

With guidance and partnership from BUILD, RJSNO began organizing Johnston Square residents for regular park cleanups, where they picked up trash and removed weeds. They also engaged the 6th Branch, a volunteer-driven nonprofit, which began cutting the grass and providing more extensive maintenance. Then the new neighborhood organization raised enough funds to repaint the basketball court and remove old fencing. These improvements gave local residents a sense of how much they could achieve by working together, and a shared investment in the park's future.

Ambrose Kennedy Park is now Henrietta Lacks Educational Park. The new name reflects the park's transformation, which includes a new basketball court, a new pool with bathrooms, a splash pad, a rain garden, new benches, new paths, and new lights. To complete this transformation, RJSNO won major grants, used its political power to gain city support, and launched new nonprofit partnerships—all of which built on the strength they created through their many clean-ups and paint jobs over a decade ago.

PARTNERING WITH A DEVELOPER

Once organized and strengthened by early successes, a community is well-positioned to pursue a partnership with a lead developer to address more complex and capital-intensive revitalization needs, including eliminating its abandoned buildings. We encourage communities to proactively seek this partnership (as opposed to waiting for a developer to approach them or to begin building in their community), as this will demonstrate their readiness and unified voice to the developer and other stakeholders. This approach also positions the community in the driver's seat and establishes a healthy balance of power as the two parties begin wrestling with community needs, solving problems, learning from one another, building shared expertise, and working towards an actionable redevelopment strategy. *By this point, the community will want to establish a formal 501c3 nonprofit with a board of directors and an ability to raise private funds.*

Selecting a Lead Developer

A partnership between a lead developer and a community must be able to sustain years of challenging and intensive collaboration on everything from acquiring properties to raising project capital to selecting project contractors. Therefore, community organizations should evaluate any potential lead developer prior to formalizing a partnership. By assessing lead developers using the following criteria, communities can be sure that they are choosing the right partner for this long-term process.

- Real estate development expertise and the capacity to directly manage the redevelopment of vacant houses and land (or to work with other developers to do so).
- A track record of successfully rebuilding and reoccupying abandoned houses.
- Financial expertise and capacity to manage complex capital sources, including combinations of government grants, philanthropic grants, equity investments, and private debt. Communities should review a lead developer's basic financial statements.
- Experience in planning and analyzing neighborhood, market, and land use data.
- Demonstrated values that align with the community's objectives, such as a proven commitment not to displace anyone through development.

Formalizing the Partnership

Once a community selects a lead developer, they should formalize a development partnership to establish a shared commitment, clearly define roles and responsibilities, and minimize future misunderstandings. There are several ways to formalize a partnership, including the creation of a joint venture with two equal members (such as a limited liability partnership). One of the most straightforward and least complicated methods of achieving this goal is through the creation and signing of a memorandum of understanding, or an MOU. Although an MOU is non-binding, it creates and clarifies a shared understanding of the values and roles of each partner, outlines how the partners will collaborate and resolve any challenges, and symbolizes each partner's commitment to working together for a shared purpose. Both the process of drafting the MOU and the act of signing it advance these goals and set the partnership on a positive path forward.

Community Redevelopment Committees

To manage its development partnership, a community organization may want to create a formal community redevelopment committee. By nominating and selecting committee members from across the redevelopment area (such as designated block captains), the organization can ensure that a broad group of residents is represented in the redevelopment planning process and is committed to advancing its success. While ReBUILD has not yet worked with a community redevelopment committee, we successfully work with ad hoc committees to vet development partners and contractors, and we believe the committee model is promising in communities in their early stages of community redevelopment planning.

A NETWORK OF PARTNERSHIPS

A partnership between a community and a lead developer is critical to exercising a community-driven redevelopment plan, but communities can also assess, recruit, and add other public and private partners to enhance their ability to create change. For example, to support its redevelopment plan, RJSNO brought together the Johnston Square Partners, which includes six nonprofit organizations and one city agency.

Over time, a community may want to seek the following types of partners to advance their cause:

- Nonprofits that create or maintain greenspace
- Economic or workforce development entities
- Arts-based organizations
- Community organizing entities
- Schools or educational institutions
- Local businesses or business networks
- Medical institutions or healthcare providers
- Social service providers
- Public agencies (e.g., a city housing agency)

These partnerships can remain informal, or they can involve more extensive MOUs or partnership agreements to formalize shared values and individual roles. These collaboratives can partner in a variety of ways, but we suggest that they convene at least monthly to ensure they are all coordinating and continually working towards a common purpose.



IDENTIFYING LOCAL NEEDS

Upon finalizing a partnership, a lead developer and a community organization should first build a common understanding of the needs and priorities they must work together to address. While needs assessment requires time and patience, it will lead to a much more smooth, unified, and well-informed planning process. We have used several methods to work with communities to complete needs assessments, which are outlined below.

Listening Sessions

Lead developers and community organizations can begin assessing community needs by co-organizing in-person listening sessions. These sessions should take place in a convenient and accessible community location such as a local school, recreation center, or faith institution. To invite neighbors to these sessions, community organizations can deliver flyers to local homes and gathering spaces and announce them at monthly community meetings.

The partners should prepare for these listening sessions by developing maps and surveys that allow residents and stakeholders to identify local neighborhood strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (or a SWOT analysis). Topics of these listening sessions can include recreation and open space, housing, education, and economic opportunities. Besides informing future planning, these sessions are an opportunity for the partners to grow their relationship and to build trust between the lead developer and a wider set of community members.

SWOT ANALYSIS

Communities often use SWOT analyses to identify local strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in their local housing market and community that should be considered in a redevelopment plan. A SWOT analysis can focus on a variety of features both within and beyond the boundaries of a community, including:

- Major employers
- Significant institutions
- Community and recreational centers
- Attractions and historical sites
- Parks and greenspaces
- Transit and highway access points
- Infrastructure in need of maintenance
- Areas of concentrated blight
- Crime hotspots
- Pollution sites

A SWOT analysis is an effective tool for turning organizing into action. By engaging residents in an analysis of community strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, residents can begin to build consensus around their redevelopment priorities and to break down an enormous task (e.g., rebuilding a neighborhood) into more digestible action steps (e.g., prioritizing housing rehabilitation around key assets, targeting key crime hotspots for intervention).

Parcel Surveys

To gain a deeper understanding of and familiarity with community needs—and to continue to engage residents to join the redevelopment process—lead developers and communities can organize block-by-block parcel surveys. Using a basemap created by the lead developer or a planning consultant, pairs or groups of residents systematically walk every block in the neighborhood;

mark all vacant buildings; and note the condition of vacant buildings, vacant lots, and other sites. The lead developer can provide up-front training on mapping, guidance on how to identify a vacant property, and a scoring system to help quantify the level of blight for each property. The partners can then directly incorporate the information they gather into a future community reinvestment plan.

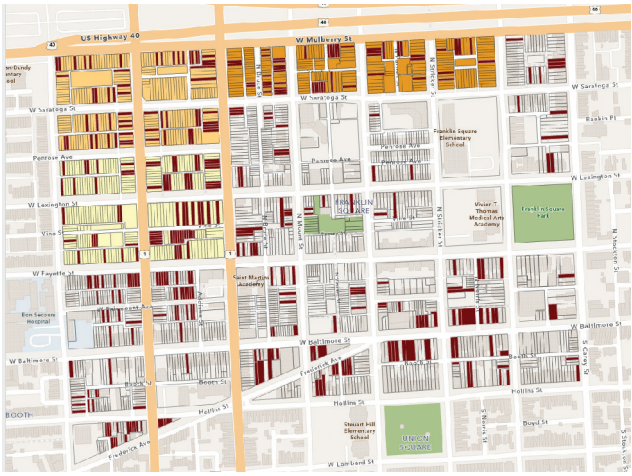
Data Collection, Mapping, and Market Analysis

As the partners engage residents in listening sessions and parcel surveys, the lead developer should also begin collecting and mapping data that will support future planning activities, either by using in-house skillsets or by hiring a consultant. Below are examples of data sets that can be mapped and modeled for planning and analysis:

- Built environment (existing buildings, roads and transportation, housing stock, open spaces, businesses and commercial areas, landmarks)
- Zoning (residential, commercial, industrial)
- Land uses (ownership, property uses, density, improved versus unimproved land)
- Traffic patterns and volume

The developer may also want to assess (or engage a consultant to assess) market conditions within and immediately surrounding the neighborhood to help guide the partnership in planning reinvestment strategies. Useful market studies can include the following data:

- Local economic data (income, employment, etc.)
- Local employment market information
- Residential sales activity and concentrations
- Planned upcoming/future developments
- Building permit activity
- Tax assessments
- Vacancy rates



A lead developer should work with its community partner to review all of the collected data, discuss how it can be used to guide redevelopment strategies (e.g., sequencing; building from economic and social strengths/assets), and find ways to make the information presentable and understandable to local residents.

Field Assessment

A field assessment is a community-guided walk through a neighborhood to give a lead developer and/or other partners context around its strengths and weaknesses. This activity complements initial research and data analysis to create a better common understanding and connection among partners around a community's feel, experience, and needs. The lead developer should work with community leaders and members to arrange a field assessment that fully reflects neighborhood conditions and the key issues facing the community, which they can then incorporate into the data they gathered during listening sessions, parcel surveys, and data/market analyses.

CREATING A PLAN

In a community-wide planning process, a lead developer and community organization use the information they collect on community needs and priorities to make a plan to address them. This is a key transition in a community-driven redevelopment strategy: from relationship-building and evaluation to large-scale action; from isolated successes to a comprehensive and cohesive pathway to transformation. Community planning is an open process that engages many community members in thinking big about what is possible in their neighborhood. The goal is not only to create a roadmap for redevelopment, but to create buy-in and shared ownership of this roadmap among a community's people and partners.

Typically, redevelopment planning begins with a basic phased community reinvestment plan (or housing action plan) that a community can use to begin pursuing land and financing. Ultimately, this plan should aim for overwhelming community support (e.g., ratification from two thirds of community members at a community-wide meeting).

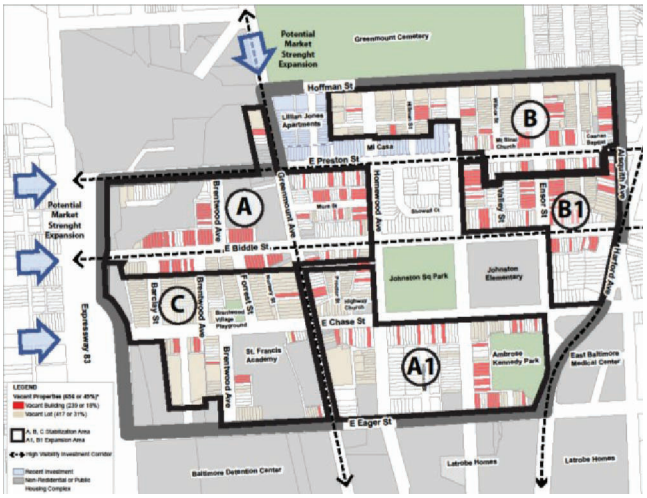
"Whole Blocks" Sequencing

A basic reinvestment plan primarily consists of a whole blocks redevelopment strategy. A whole blocks strategy prioritizes the elimination of abandonment across entire residential blocks, which is a critical element of restoring healthy neighborhoods and reactivating failing markets.

Using information from their SWOT, data, parcel, and market analyses, the partners design a strategic block-by-block sequence for rebuilding abandoned homes, which prioritizes blocks and areas based on several factors:

- **Building from Strength:** The partners should prioritize blocks or groups of blocks where rebuilt homes can be sold or leased at the required prices, which is determined by the condition of the block; how close the block is to community anchors and assets (employment, transportation, recreation, etc.); and market data on nearby home sales and values.
- **Property Ownership and Site Control:** Blocks with higher concentrations of city-owned vacant properties can usually be rebuilt more quickly than those with numerous privately-owned vacant properties.
- **Harm Reduction:** The partners can use resident feedback and crime data to identify and prioritize abandoned houses, blocks, or clusters of blight that pose the most urgent health and safety threats.
- **Visibility:** By targeting visible blocks, a developer sends a signal that a neighborhood has an active market, which attracts market activity and resources.
- **Feasibility:** The partners may first prioritize blocks with fewer abandoned houses and more occupied homes, which can lead to more rapid whole-block success and enhance their capacity to target blocks with higher concentrations.

While communities will vary in how they prioritize these factors, they all must be realistic about demand for the homes they rebuild. If a developer starts rebuilding on weak or isolated blocks that are surrounded by blight, they risk being unable to sell or reoccupy the redeveloped homes, threatening the financial sustainability of the development plan. *ReBUILD therefore recommends "building from strength" as a core priority in a sequencing plan.* Each block or cluster of blocks that a developer fully rebuilds and reoccupies then becomes a new "strength" that they can leverage to rebuild the next block over.



The sequencing plan should include a rough assessment of the financing and acquisition needed to implement each of its phases, as well as a rough projected timeline for each phase's acquisition, capitalization, and redevelopment. These projections help to set expectations, affirm that the sequence makes sense to all parties, and help the partners align opportunities with resources.

Setting Other Redevelopment Goals

In high-vacancy neighborhoods, a community reinvestment plan should focus on rebuilding abandoned houses, but it can also include other redevelopment goals, such as targeted selective demolition, community improvements, and high-level goals for redeveloping vacant lots or nonresidential spaces into multifamily and mixed-use projects, community facilities, commercial projects, or open spaces. The earlier that a community establishes goals, intentions, and a baseline plan for its larger parcels, the more power they have to hold public officials and private developers accountable to local priorities.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN REINVESTMENT PLANS

Once community leaders and a lead developer complete a first draft of a redevelopment strategy, they should share it with the broader community for dialogue, feedback, refinement, and approval. In 2024, ReBUILD supported one such community-driven development partnership in Southwest Baltimore in creating a housing action plan and presenting it to the community. Below are some strategies that the partnership used to garner constructive community participation and dialogue.

- **Mapping:** Using internal expertise and consulting support, the development team mapped their proposal to show their targeted blocks and sequence in a visual form, which made it easier for community members to review and respond to the draft plan.
- **Preparation:** The partners prepared to explain why and how they prioritized key blocks, why they thought this sequence would maximize the impact and effectiveness of redevelopment across the neighborhood, and why building a baseline consensus around a plan was important.
- **Structure:** By placing maps and other plan information on posters, distributing them around a large room, and assigning key leaders to each board, the partners facilitated a series of authentic one-on-one and small group conversations that they could use to revise the plan, which they then presented to the community at a later meeting.

GAINING SITE CONTROL

To bring a completed community reinvestment plan and whole blocks revitalization strategy to reality, the lead developer and community organization must work with its city partners to seek and gain control of as many of the neighborhood's vacant properties and lots as possible. Accessing rights to large clusters of abandoned properties—as opposed to acquiring properties one by one—positions a community to pursue redevelopment at the scale and pace required to restore whole blocks and fulfill the goals of its plan. Just as importantly, community-wide site control allows the community to maintain ownership of a revitalization process from start to finish, ensuring the process adheres to its shared visions and priorities. Without community-wide site control, speculative developers or buyers could acquire groups of properties with no intention of rebuilding them in a timely manner or using them to advance the greater good, potentially undermining years of partnering, assessing, and planning.

Fortunately, those years of groundwork and collaboration also make bulk site control achievable. By putting in place a strong community-driven redevelopment partnership, completing a detailed internal assessment of neighborhood vacancy, and producing a thorough community-driven reinvestment plan, community revitalization partnerships will be well-positioned to advocate that they should be the stewards of unused land in their neighborhood.

Land Disposition Agreements

Through a Land Disposition Agreement (LDA), a city agrees to transfer ownership of a group of predefined abandoned properties to community-based developers or partnerships that are leading redevelopment of a neighborhood or a revitalization area. An LDA is a legal contract between the city and a community-approved developer that binds them to work together to acquire, sell, and redevelop all properties in the agreement, as well as laying out the timing and desired outcomes of redevelopment.

The LDA should cover all abandoned properties in a specified geography, even long-neglected abandoned properties that the city does not yet own but has the right to acquire or receive. In other words, an LDA establishes the city's commitment to transfer to the lead developer all abandoned properties in an area that the city owns *in the present or future,* with minimal costs or obstacles.

Pursuing an LDA

An LDA is a major commitment by a city government, so the community partners will need to make a strong and convincing case that they are equipped to manage redevelopment at the neighborhood scale. To successfully negotiate or advocate for an LDA, the partners must be able to check the following boxes:



- The partnership must have completed an assessment of all vacant properties and parcels in a neighborhood and gained community approval of a reinvestment plan with a detailed and logical strategy for sequencing redevelopment of these properties.
- The community organization must have enough organized political power to effectively advocate for the LDA. A strong or vocal community leader is not enough; a cohort of community residents must be able to advocate for the agreement with one voice and a shared vision for the future.
- The lead developer must be able to demonstrate its capacity to rebuild single-family properties under the LDA at the scale and speed to warrant such a large commitment. In specific, the lead developer will need to prove it can successfully manage redevelopment of 10-15 scattered-site abandoned properties and/or lots in a one- to two-year period, and that its balance sheet is strong enough to meet the capital needs of a project of this scale and timeframe.

A well-executed partnership and community-driven planning process will position the partners to meet these three criteria well before seeking an LDA. In fact, whether or not the partners can successfully advocate for an LDA may be a good test as to whether their partnership and their redevelopment plan are strong enough to withstand the challenges of executing whole blocks redevelopment.

Before signing an LDA, the lead developer and community leadership should review it together closely to make sure that it includes all the properties they want to redevelop as part of their whole blocks plan, as well as to ensure that it does not impose any requirements that they would be unable to meet. We advise the lead developer to consider engaging a legal counsel to note any concerns or needed revisions to the LDA prior to its enactment.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN LDA

An LDA is invaluable to a whole blocks revitalization strategy for several reasons:

- An LDA gives the lead developer site control over vacant properties across a neighborhood under a single agreement, including neglected vacant properties that the city does not yet own. This scope allows the developer to plan—and ultimately achieve—redevelopment at the scale necessary to stabilize entire housing markets, and it reduces the risk that the houses will remain vacant.
- By proving the city's long-term commitment to acquiring all vacant houses in an area—regardless of current ownership—the LDA assures all financing sources for the redevelopment partnership that all of these vacant properties will be available for restoration, which increases the security of (and potential return on) their investments.
- An LDA provides community members with an assurance that the city is committed to helping them bring their redevelopment plans for their residential areas to fruition, giving them more reason to believe that the change they envision is achievable.

COMMUNITY VISION PLANS

While an initial community reinvestment plan can advance a community-driven redevelopment strategy toward implementation, the partners will reach a stage when they are ready to create a Community Vision Plan (or a Master Plan), which is a far more detailed, professional, and comprehensive plan that communities can use to scale up their redevelopment efforts. Community Vision Plans create a powerful shared vision among community members, a lead developer, and a community's network of other public and private partners by establishing their plans to meet a wider set of community needs, ranging from physical redevelopment plans to streetscaping and placemaking to community programs and services.

A Vision Plan advances two critical long-term needs for scaling up a whole blocks redevelopment strategy:

- It more clearly explains to local policymakers and city and state agencies the public support and partnership the community needs to rebuild itself.
- It is a fundraising tool that the community partners can use to secure public and private grants and investments to implement their strategies at scale.

Hiring a Planning Firm

A community seeking to complete a Community Vision Plan will need to hire a multi-disciplinary firm that includes architects, landscape architects, and planners. The firm should have a track record of community engagement and examples of the tools they use to gather community input and feedback. We suggest communities (1) issue a request for proposals (RFP) to solicit proposals from planning firms and (2) create a steering committee of community members and partners to rank proposals and select a firm (if a Community Redevelopment Committee is in place, it can serve this function). The partners should also choose a point of contact to serve as project manager, coordinate stakeholders, and manage a contract with the chosen firm.

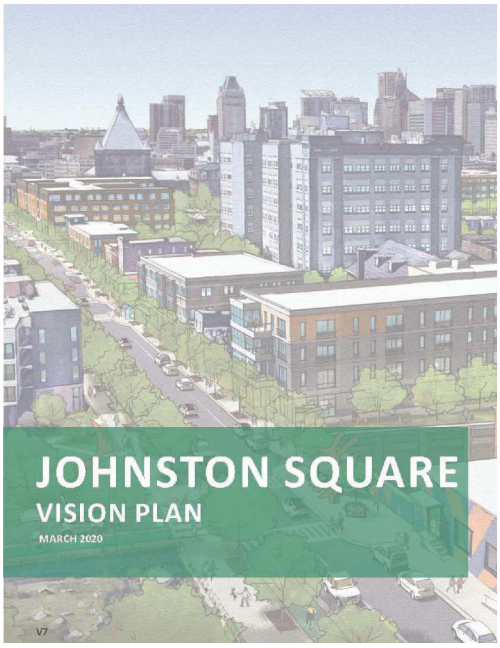
Completing a large-scale vision plan requires far more funding than a basic reinvestment plan, so the community should only engage in this process when they have established a pathway to community-wide site control and have enough partnerships, capacity, and community buy-in to ensure they can act on a plan of this magnitude.

Partnering with the City

The partners should involve their local planner from the Baltimore City Department of Planning at the beginning of their vision planning process. The planner can help guide the planning process to follow the department's policies and guidelines for the recognition of plans, which will help ensure that the city accepts the plan as a guide for its larger comprehensive planning and for other decision-making by city agencies. These guidelines can be found at planning.baltimorecity.gov/master-plans.

Initial Assessment

A vision planning process begins with an external assessment and analysis of neighborhood conditions, including neighborhood context (e.g., nearby institutions and infrastructure, conditions in adjacent neighborhoods, investments and nuisances in surrounding locations), neighborhood history, street patterns and transportation infrastructure, land uses and zoning, open spaces, architectural character, and neighborhood identity and culture. The plan should also reassess current market conditions, assets, and challenges that will impact and shape redevelopment over the next several years.



Completing the Plan

The partners should establish their intentions with the planning firm, such as developing without displacement, creating a mixed-income neighborhood, and/or targeting key zones for redevelopment. From there, the firm will conduct conversations, focus groups, tours, and meetings with community leaders, members, partners, institutions, and stakeholders to further guide the process and incorporate a variety of perspectives. Then the firm and the partners will plan a series of meetings to attract broad participation and discussion, which may also include breakout sessions to offer more opportunities for attendees to provide input. In these forums, the partners can set a wide range of priorities, review options, refine proposed plans, and build consensus on a pathway to redevelopment that is both ambitious and realistic. The process should be guided by the desires of local residents, but it should also rely on the technical expertise of the lead developer to ensure it is achievable and responsive to market realities.

A final Vision Plan should reflect community priorities (e.g., a safe and attractive neighborhood; broad housing options and retail diversity), actions required to realize these goals, and which partners are responsible for each component. The plan may include public space enhancements (e.g., open spaces, streetscaping), targeted redevelopments, neighborhood identity and branding, community amenities and quality of life improvements, desired land use and zoning changes, and initiatives to support legacy residents.

INCORPORATING "WHOLE BLOCKS" INTO A VISION PLAN

To promote and advance a community-driven whole blocks revitalization strategy, a Community Vision Plan should incorporate, update, and build upon the initial whole blocks sequencing plan. The partners should use the planning process to refine and further promote strategies for scaling and sequencing the redevelopment of abandoned houses from one block to the next. This intentional approach will ensure the community's whole blocks strategy remains a priority for residents and partners, and that it is promoted and recognized as a key priority for decision-makers across city government and beyond.

FINANCING REDEVELOPMENT

Like all elements of community-driven redevelopment, redevelopment financing strategies are most likely to be successful when they are collaborative. The lead developer and community organization will need to partner to create a plan with the appropriate financing targets to achieve their whole blocks redevelopment goals. Then they will need to work together to raise the necessary funds from a variety of public and private sources. While fundraising should begin early in the planning process—and in fact is necessary to pay for a Community Vision Plan—it is the completion of the polished plan that will enable the partners to ramp up their fundraising activities and to aggressively pursue larger grants and investments.

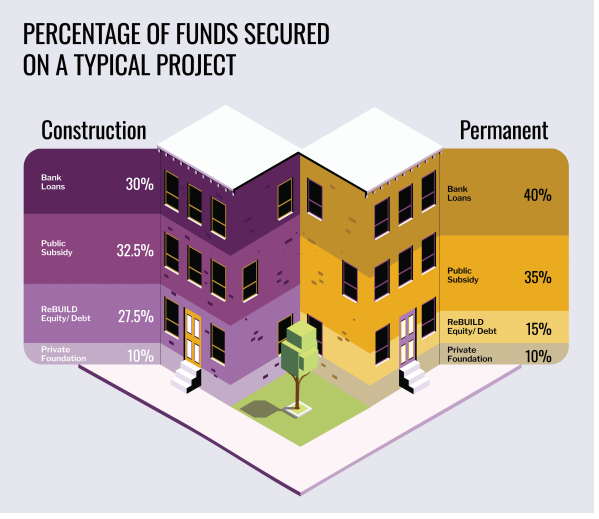
Needed Types of Funding

A community-driven whole blocks redevelopment strategy will require the following types of funding to be successful:

- Operating funds to sustain both the lead developer and the community organization. If the lead developer is a mission-driven private developer, these funds will primarily take the form of project income, while nonprofit developers will rely on a mix of project income, grants, and donations. The community organization will mainly rely on grants and donations.
- Construction and permanent project capital sources to complete redevelopment, including debt, equity, public subsidies, and capital grants from private funders.

Creating and Implementing a Financing Plan

A financing plan should include an assessment of year-over-year capital needs to carry out a whole blocks redevelopment strategy at scale, a "capital stack" outline to show how much capital is required from various sources (e.g., private investments, lenders, city/state subsidies, philanthropic support, etc.), and the identification and assessment of public and private sources needed to fulfill this strategy. The partnership can also identify key geographic designations that allow for access to specific subsidies (e.g., Baltimore City Impact Investment Areas, Baltimore Regional Neighborhood Initiative priority areas).



While it is the job of the lead developer to implement the financing plan and raise the necessary real estate development capital, the partners should be in regular communication during this process. The community organization will likely have a critical role in raising this capital, and the developer should update community leaders on progress in fulfilling the fundraising goals, which will dictate the pace of redevelopment. In addition, some funding sources include requirements or restrictions that can affect a redevelopment strategy (e.g., whether homes must be for homeownership or rental, income restrictions for the future occupants), and the community should understand the trade-offs associated with these funding sources and have opportunities to raise any concerns.

Project Equity

To effectively implement a whole blocks strategy, the lead developer will need significant equity (i.e., working capital) to cover cash flow needs during the redevelopment process. "Equity" is the term for all forms of

capital investments in a development program or project other than senior debt, and it must cover the costs required to start a project and keep it running until it begins to generate positive cash flow. Equity is especially important for larger scale or riskier projects, as it can help absorb potential losses and make projects more appealing to providers of construction and permanent loans, such as banks and community development financial institutions.When it is unrestricted, equity also allows developers to be nimble in managing budget adjustments and in distributing and recycling funds across multiple properties and projects in a whole blocks strategy over time.

Equity investors are high-net-worth individuals, families, or private or nonprofit institutions that are mission-driven, can afford a degree of risk, but still seek a return on their investment. However, unlike in market-rate deals, investors in whole blocks strategies must be able to accept lower rates of return, as high returns are both (1) unlikely in high-vacancy markets and (2) inconsistent with the expectations of the mission-driven subsidy programs that the developer will also need. ReBUILD has sought mission-driven investors who require a 2% annual return, can make investments of 10-15 years (allowing capital to be recycled from one project to the next), and can withstand a partial loss of equity in unusual conditions. Mission-driven investors will need evidence that their principal and interest will be repaid, but also that their investments support a strategy that fulfills their social goals.

Project Subsidies

Along with mission-driven capital, a whole blocks strategy requires project grants and subsidies that do not need to be repaid. Direct subsidies cover the gap between the cost of rebuilding an abandoned property and its value once completed. The State of Maryland and City of Baltimore use an array of grant programs to support single-family redevelopment, and several local foundations and institutions also offer direct project-based capital grants. A developer may need multiple subsidies to cover its funding gap for projects of as few as 4 or 5 properties. In addition, residents who buy or rent the completed homes may be able to access indirect subsidies to cover a portion of their housing expenses, such as rental assistance or down payment assistance.

Before applying for funds, the developer and community partner should seek to build relationships with program liaisons at their city and state agencies or with program officers at local foundations. In evaluating funding proposals, both public and private funders often assess both (1) the degree to which a project is part of a comprehensive and feasible redevelopment strategy and (2) the level of community involvement in the project, so the partners will want to emphasize their Community Vision Plan and their LDA in their funding proposals. Many subsidy providers will also want letters of support or other evidence that community members support a project, have been actively involved in its planning, and will remain engaged throughout the process.

SHARING THE STORY

To raise impact investments and operating funds for Johnston Square's whole blocks redevelopment strategy, ReBUILD Metro and RJSNO have given over 100 presentations to individuals, families, institutional leaders, faith-based groups, and other interested audiences to share our collaborative approach to community-driven development. These presentations, which have ranged in size from an audience of one to groups of over 50, begin with a slideshow and discussion, followed by a walking tour, driving tour, or bus tour of the neighborhood.

These gatherings are more effective when leaders from both partners are presenting in tandem. The goal is to generate hope and belief that there is a brighter future for the neighborhood. Even if a donation or investment does not follow, we consider our presentation a success if the attendees leave with a newfound belief in the work we are doing and its benefit to Baltimore.

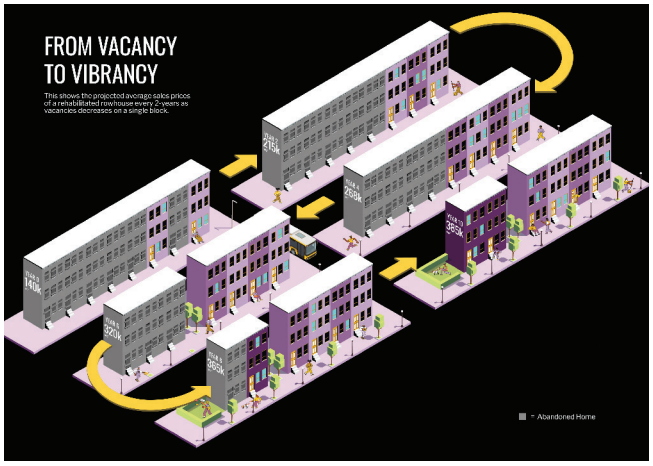
LAUNCHING REDEVELOPMENT

Upon finalizing an LDA, receiving city approval or acceptance of a Vision Plan, and raising a critical mass of mission-driven investments and project subsidies, *the community partnership is ready to launch its whole blocks redevelopment strategy and target priority abandoned properties for acquisition and renovation.* By this point, the lead developer and community partner will ideally have a strong foundation of trust and mutual understanding to coordinate the implementation of the redevelopment strategy. The partners should meet regularly—possibly along with other partners—to review redevelopment progress, address any challenges or barriers, and engage in ongoing planning and decision-making.

To sustain a community-driven process, the partners will need to routinely track and discuss several issues:

- Project schedule and phasing status and updates
- Selection of contractors
- Project and property designs
- Plans for completed properties (e.g., sale or rental)
- Ongoing capital/funding needs
- Communicating with residents living next to properties slated for renovation on schedules and impacts

In addition, the partners will need to coordinate frequent outreach to city representatives to advocate for support or action around a variety of needs, from acquiring targeted properties, to processing permits, to demolishing abandoned properties that cannot be salvaged.



Leveraging the Partnership Network

Once a Vision Plan is complete and a whole blocks redevelopment strategy is underway, a community will be in a strong position to expand its implementation of other strategies in the Vision Plan, including creating or enhancing its open spaces and increasing neighborhood attractiveness and promotion. By strategically aligning whole block abandoned housing redevelopment with community improvements, the two revitalization strategies reinforce and propel each other: new community improvements help attract new residents to buy or rent the restored homes, and new homeowners and residents increase social capital and collective investment in a neighborhood, which will lead to utilization and stewardship of the community improvements over time. Together, these strategies result in healthier, safer, more livable communities that experience sustained economic growth.

To advance a comprehensive redevelopment approach, the community can expand, activate, and continue to nurture the network of trusted partners that it built during the organizing and planning process, ideally including arts-based organizations and organizations that create and maintain open spaces. To sustain the buy-in of these partners to the broader vision of the neighborhood—and to ensure that all partners and builders are reading from the same playbook—community leaders should continue to convene all of its partners on a regular basis.

The lead developer may also want to build or enhance its own relationships with these partners to coordinate the reuse of all abandoned properties, vacant parcels, and public spaces across a neighborhood, which will help the partners ensure that the block-by-block sequencing of abandoned housing redevelopment and community improvements move forward on the same timelines.

TEST-DRIVING SCATTERED-SITE REDEVELOPMENT

While successful whole blocks redevelopment requires a community-wide plan, an LDA, and large-scale financing, a community-driven redevelopment partnership may want to pursue a small-scale single-family redevelopment phase earlier in the process. This approach has a few advantages:

- It gives community members an early signal that their planning will lead to positive changes in their neighborhood, which can help solidify their trust in their development partner.
- It gives the partnership a chance to "test drive" their redevelopment strategy and their collaborative approach to implementation, allowing them to identify challenges and learn lessons that they can apply in later redevelopment phases.
- It gives the partnership a head start in resolving blight and vacancy, adding market strength that they can build on in later phases.
- By documenting this project and offering it as a stop on neighborhood tours, it more quickly demonstrates to supporters that the partnership can convert funding into results.

For example, in 2018, ReBUILD rebuilt 12 abandoned rowhouses in Johnston Square into new homes. This project helped ReBUILD and RJSNO secure an LDA and advance into vision planning. However, it is important to note that market conditions and funding sources required ReBUILD to reoccupy these homes as rental housing, which was feasible because ReBUILD already had property management infrastructure.

Building on a Solid Foundation

Depending on the size and scale of abandonment in a neighborhood, a whole blocks community-driven redevelopment process may take 5 to 10 years, so both the developer and community must maintain a long-term commitment to their partnership. *If they have been successful in their organizing, planning, site control, and financing, this commitment will be easier to maintain, because the results of this work will begin to show.*

ReBUILD Metro and RJSNO formed a partnership in 2013, after RJSNO invited ReBUILD to work in Johnston Square. The partners completed their first parcel survey, market analysis, and redevelopment sequencing plan in 2014. After years of planning and advocacy, they secured a Land Disposition Agreement in 2019, worked with other partners to complete the Johnston Square Vision Plan in 2020, and raised $10 million in impact investments by 2021. During this time, RJSNO created over a dozen pocket parks and murals, and ReBUILD redeveloped 12 single-family homes and a 60-unit multifamily building. The two partners worked together to build their organizational strengths and collective experience, select development partners, raise project funding, monitor redevelopment, and celebrate when projects were completed. In 2024, Johnston Square's revitalization took flight: ReBUILD restored 30 abandoned homes and partnered to begin construction on a 109-unit apartment building with a first-floor public library. This progress is attracting new partnerships, supporters, and public awareness, creating even more momentum as the partners work to eliminate abandonment across the neighborhood, block by block.

This scale of impact is unusual in Baltimore, but it is replicable. By being patient, persistent, strategic, and committed to a whole blocks redevelopment strategy that is community-driven every step of the way, neighborhoods across Baltimore can realize their potential and rebuild themselves into "whole neighborhoods" where both new and longtime residents can thrive—and where nobody has to live next to an abandoned property.

Want to learn more about ReBUILD Metro's whole blocks redevelopment model? Take a look through our online Whole Blocks Toolkit by scanning the QR code.

ReBUILD METRO

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